



News Release

Arizona Ecological Services Field Office

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Population of Endangered Bird Being Considered In Roosevelt Water Storage Decisions -U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Salt River Project Seek Public Input-

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) and Salt River Project (SRP) invite the public to participate in determining the scope and extent of Roosevelt dam operation on a population of endangered birds. SRP seeks to develop a Habitat Conservation Plan for the operation of Roosevelt Dam and water levels in Roosevelt reservoir that may result in the flooding of recently established and occupied southwestern willow flycatcher breeding habitat. In turn, SRP will seek a Service permit to “take” flycatchers and other sensitive species and habitat that may result due to the routine operation of Roosevelt dam and refilling of the reservoir.

Since 1996, lower-than-usual rainfall and snow-melt have resulted in lowered water levels at Lake Roosevelt. Six years of declining water levels have exposed the nutrient rich sediment deposited where Tonto Creek and the Salt River flow into the reservoir. Dense riparian vegetation, principally non-native salt cedar, has been established on both deltas. The new habitat has resulted in the immigration and expansion of up to 250 southwestern willow flycatchers (121 documented nesting pairs) during this summer breeding season alone—all in an area usually submerged under water stored for use in the Phoenix metropolitan area. The area is also occupied by threatened bald eagles and yellow-billed cuckoos - a candidate for Endangered Species Act protection.

The southwestern willow flycatcher was added to the Federal list as an endangered species in February 1995. As such, it is protected from “take,” including harassment or harm resulting from altering or destroying its habitat. The Service may however, under limited circumstances, issue permits to take federally listed species when such a taking is incidental to—and not the purpose of—otherwise lawful activities and the taking does not jeopardize the continued survival of the species.

Since 1911, Roosevelt Dam and Reservoir, has provided water for power generation, irrigation, municipal and other uses. Today, SRP manages Roosevelt together with three other reservoirs on the Salt River and two on the Verde River, to supply water to 1.6 million people in the cities of Phoenix, Mesa, Chandler, Tempe, Gilbert, Scottsdale, Tolleson, and Avondale. Irrigation water is provided to agricultural lands in the Valley, and SRP delivers Roosevelt water to the Salt River Pima-Maricopa, Fort McDowell, and Gila River Indian communities, Buckeye Irrigation Company, Roosevelt Irrigation District, Roosevelt Water Conservation District, and others. Additionally, Roosevelt and other SRP reservoirs provide a variety of recreational uses and environmental benefits in central Arizona.

When rain and snow runoff conditions again replenish water-stores required by Valley residents and industries, new delta habitat now relied upon by flycatchers will be periodically inundated. This refilling of the reservoir will adversely affect the breeding habitat and will result in the harassment, harm, and possible death of some flycatchers. SRP is in the process of developing the Roosevelt Habitat Conservation Plan (RHCP) to minimize and mitigate (offset) impacts to the southwestern willow flycatcher and its habitat associated with the filling and continued operation of Roosevelt. SRP will submit the RHCP to the Service in anticipation of Service approval of the plan and issuance of a permit for the incidental take of flycatchers.

Concurrent with the development of the conservation plan, the Service and SRP are preparing an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) to analyze the physical, biological, social, and economic effects of the proposed RHCP and its reasonable alternatives. Developing the RHCP and EIS is a public process. Identifying potential alternatives to the conservation plan, as well as significant environmental issues related to the conservation plan, is called scoping.

Public input provided during scoping will be analyzed in the EIS process and, as feasible, integrated into the RHCP. The Service will fully consider information developed in the EIS to evaluate SRP's proposed RHCP and its alternatives as it renders a decision on whether to issue a permit for SRP's dam operations to take flycatchers. Public comment will again be solicited once a draft EIS has been developed.

To initiate scoping and the EIS process, SRP and the Service have proposed four RHCP alternatives:

1. Proposed action – Service issues an incidental take permit authorizing the continued operation of Roosevelt by SRP with implementation of the RHCP to minimize and mitigate the potential take of flycatchers and other federally listed species.
2. No action – No incidental take permit is issued by the Service – this would require SRP to do everything within its control to avoid any take of listed species in its operation of Roosevelt dam (keep long term water storage level below current habitat levels).
3. Other HCP alternatives – Service issues an incidental take permit for the RHCP involving modification of operations at Roosevelt and other SRP-operated reservoirs on the Verde and Salt rivers together with measures to minimize and mitigate the take of listed species.
4. Section 7 Consultation – This alternative requires the identification of a Federal agency (probably the Bureau of Reclamation) to evaluate and negotiate a solution to the take issue through a different, non-public, process available under the Endangered Species Act.

The Service and SRP will host a public information and scoping meeting to solicit comments on the scope of the EIS on October 22, 2001 from 6:00-8:00 p.m. at the offices of Salt River Project, 1521 Project Dr. (Galvin Pkwy. and Van Buren St.), Tempe, AZ. Additional information and scoping comment sheets are available by contacting Mr. David Harlow, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 2321 West Royal Palm Rd., Suite 103, Phoenix, AZ 85021 (voice 602-242-0210, fax 602-242-2513). Scoping comments should be sent to Mr. Harlow by November 22, 2001.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 94-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System which encompasses more than 535 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 70 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resource offices and 78 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.

<<http://arizonaes.fws.gov>>

Note to Editors: A color map of Roosevelt Lake and flycatcher nest sites, and photographs (image library) of the affected species are available on the Service's website at <http://arizonaes.fws.gov/> or by request from the listed contacts. B-roll of flycatchers and Roosevelt Lake habitat is available by contacting Wes Keyes at Arizona Game and Fish Department (602-789-3230).